

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**KEY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS CONCEPTS AND THE BUSH DOCTRINE: THE
PRICE FOR HEGEMONIC STABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT

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The 9/11 attacks brought to the forefront a very different threat to U.S. interests: non-state terrorists and rogue nations with the capacity to inflict massive casualties with little or no warning. The response of the second Bush administration to the new situation was articulated in the September 2002 National Security Strategy. A liberal world-view is central to the U.S. foreign policy position, but the NSS clearly indicates a willingness of the U.S. to work alone and act preemptively against any threats to its ability to either project or protect its interests around the world. The overarching strategy, termed the Bush Doctrine, is explored in this study. At issue is the ability of the U.S. to sustain a grand strategy of primacy in the emerging global environment. A number of international relations concepts will test the U.S. position. Will nations buy into U.S. efforts and bandwagon with it or will they gradually work apart from the U.S. to seek more global balance? Can containment and deterrence counter contemporary threats or are more aggressive means required? Finally, can the U.S. afford to expend money and manpower in the interests of the world while its own primal position declines relative to rising powers?

KEY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS CONCEPTS AND THE BUSH DOCTRINE: THE PRICE FOR HEGEMONIC STABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Prior to the terrorist attacks on the United States (U.S.) on September 11, 2001 (9/11), the U.S. position of benign hegemony in an interdependent world generally prevailed. However, the 9/11 attacks brought to the forefront a very different threat to U.S. interests: non-state terrorists and rogue nations with the capacity to inflict massive casualties with little or no warning. The response of the second Bush administration to the new situation was articulated in the National Security Strategy (NSS) published in September, 2002. A liberal world-view is central to the U.S. foreign policy position, but the NSS clearly indicates a willingness of the U.S. to work alone and act preemptively against any threats to its ability to either project or protect its interests around the world. The overarching strategy, termed the Bush Doctrine, is explored in this study.

At issue is the ability of the U.S. to sustain a grand strategy of primacy in the emerging global environment. A number of international relations concepts will test the U.S. position. Will nations buy into U.S. efforts and bandwagon with it or will they gradually work apart from the U.S. to seek more global balance? Can containment and deterrence counter contemporary threats or are more aggressive means required? In the end, can the U.S. afford to expend money and manpower in the interests of the world while its own primal position declines relative to rising powers?

Key International Relations Concepts Relative to U.S. History

It is worth exploring the evolution of American international relations strategies leading up to the emergence of the Bush Doctrine. The ebb and flow of people and events over time drove corresponding shifts in policies and opinions relative to the U.S. global role. Central to these policy matters is America's perception of its own exceptionalism in history as a country whose values and behavior transcend that of any other nation. One extreme of this concept is exemplarism, a benign form that positions the U.S. government and way of life as the ideal model for the world to emulate if they desire. The other extreme, vindictionalism, actively or forcefully promotes this belief.¹ Changes in how the U.S. perceived the promotion of its values also led to changes in its role in the world in terms of such concepts as preemption and unilateralism.

1776 through World War II

The lengthy period between the founding of the United States and the conclusion to World War II can be characterized as one dominated by exemplarism, and isolationism. The

exceptionalist stance is evident throughout this timeframe. Thomas Jefferson is quoted as having referred to U.S. citizens as “the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” Abraham Lincoln, speaking of the Declaration of Independence, promised democracy “not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.”² The prevailing attitude of U.S. leaders throughout this era was that it was unwise for the U.S. to take a vindictionalist position and inject itself into the affairs and troubles of other countries. This became a central feature for pursuing a largely isolationist foreign policy strategy.

A key enabler of the U.S. isolationist approach was the influence of British power throughout the rest of the world. In the seemingly endless series of conflicts engulfing Europe from the birth of the U.S. until the Congress in Vienna in 1814, the British were consistently able to provide sufficient balance of power to match or defeat the hegemonic aspirations of other European great powers. Pax Britannica, the 100-year peace enabled by British hegemonic stability and lasting from the Vienna Congress until the onset of World War I, provided additional international cover under which the U.S. could attend to its own affairs.

The U.S. took advantage of the extended opportunity to focus inward, steadily expanding its own borders through both purchase and conquest under manifest destiny and by investing heavily in business, technology, and infrastructure to become, at the end of World War I, a great and influential world power. President Woodrow Wilson sought to leverage U.S. prestige after World War I to engage the world’s major powers in efforts to prevent the reoccurrence of another such devastating conflict. He convincingly sold his concept of collective security and multilateral responsibility to much of the world, leading to the formation of the League of Nations. President Wilson was unable, however, to convince his own government of the wisdom of membership and, though periodically engaged in multilateral global security efforts, the U.S. slipped back toward isolationism until drawn into the Second World War.

America’s geographic and political isolation largely negated any need for strong defensive policy measures, but a minor conflict during this timeframe was pivotal in formulating international law regarding the future use of preemption. In 1837, the British crossed the border from Canada to attack and destroy an American ship to curtail American support for a revolt in eastern Canada. This event led to then-Secretary of State Daniel Webster reaching an agreement with the British that prohibited cross-border raids unless there was a “necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation.”³

Cold War

The U.S. emerged from World War II not merely as a great power but as one of two global superpowers. The prosecution of the Truman Doctrine ensured a more active promotion of American values abroad. The U.S. role in the formation of the United Nations in 1945 initiated a long period of multilateral cooperation that would successfully convey the country through a protracted and tense ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union. Exceptionalism, now strongly vindicationist, remained the centerpiece of American resolve. Two dominant international relations developments emerged in this period that guided U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War and into the current era.

The first was the arrival of Pax Americana, the 20th century successor to Great Britain's global beneficence of the previous century. A combination of American military might, economic prosperity, and liberal values convinced the other Western powers to bandwagon with the U.S. to form an interdependent bloc of nations ideologically aligned and diametrically opposed to Soviet expansion. The U.S. shouldered the primary burden of security of its allies in return for their political and economic support in an arrangement referred to by some as the "liberal institutional bargain." The U.S., though clearly the dominant power behind Western hegemonic stability, sustained a cooperative approach with its allies that set the stage for positive long-term relations and enabled U.S. efforts to establish the United Nations in 1945.

Linked to Pax Americana and Soviet responses to that development was the formation of collective defense security agreements. Aggressive Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, including the Berlin blockade of 1948-1949, contributed to the U.S. decision to sign the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) treaty in April 1949. The U.S. commitment to rebuilding post-World War II Europe via the Marshall Plan, combined with collective security concerns, led to the rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1954, an event closely associated with the subsequent creation of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact in 1955.⁴

The second development was that of mechanisms for controlling Soviet aggression. The policy of containment was adopted by the U.S. shortly after the conclusion of World War II as a means of dealing with the expanding physical domain of the Soviet Union. Aggressive Soviet annexations in Eastern Europe fostered concerns that the Soviet intent was less about physical security than it was about ideological expansion.⁵ The evolved response to what would become a long ideological confrontation between the Soviet Union and the West was containment.

The Cold War containment policy was largely attributed to the observations and recommendations of Soviet specialist George F. Kennan, whose published policy recommendation in 1947 was for "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of

Russian expansive tendencies” executed by “adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points...”¹⁶ It proved to be a reasonable policy for the duration of the Cold War. While the numerous counterforce engagements envisioned by Kennan produced mixed success for the U.S., the lack of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union minimized opportunities for armed escalation long enough for the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The evolution of a nuclear bipolar world greatly raised the stakes on the utility and efficacy of a deterrent strategy. Still, it became the policy of choice for both superpowers as they each built up conventional and nuclear weapons capabilities throughout the conflict. Indeed, strategic analyst Colin Gray says of the Cold War that it “did, however, provide [deterrence] with its lengthy strategic moment of supreme historical glory.” The capabilities of each country gave rise to the generally agreed-upon outcome of mutual assured destruction in the event of nuclear war, thus resulting in each power effectively deterring the other. “The nuclear war that must not be fought and could not be won,” Gray concludes, “had to be deterred.”¹⁷

The possibility of the United States foregoing containment or deterrence and instead launching a surprise attack against the Soviets was considered and rejected. The use of such preventive tactics was deemed to be counter to American values. It was believed that while Americans would still support a war started in such a manner, “Many would doubt that it was a ‘just war’ and that all possibilities for a peaceful settlement had been explored in good faith.”¹⁸

Post-Cold War to 9/11

The collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to vindicate the liberal institutional bargain and opened the door for broader application of the theory. President H.W. Bush clearly saw the U.S. leading the way toward his New World Order, in which “the United States--freed from cold war stalemate--is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders, a world in which freedom and respect for human rights finds a home among all nations.”¹⁹ The extensive and highly successful coalition assembled to dislodge Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 was a model of multilateral cooperation and U.S. primacy, portending positive global change from the U.S. perspective.

The initial surge of multilateral cooperation was accompanied by efforts to democratize more countries, particularly the post-communist east European states, and expand economic globalization. Democracy based on human rights and personal freedom was long a position of American exceptionalism and the model to emulate in the New World Order. Similarly, market-based economic commerce, mimicking the U.S. interstate commerce system with its limited trade barriers and government intervention, became the sought-for solution.¹⁰

U.S. hopes for a stable world shepherded by its own powerful yet benign presence were dealt a series of setbacks as the country tried to come to grips with expanding overseas combat, peacekeeping, and humanitarian missions with uneven multilateral support. Those events, concurrent with the U.S. economic explosion of the 1990s, led to a more focused Clinton administration policy termed engagement and enlargement. That policy engaged countries on an economic basis while severely limiting involvement in peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts.¹¹ Though the scope of policies evolved after the Cold War, the liberal institutional bargain remained intact in spite of the U.S. role as sole global superpower, a credit to the continued cooperative American position.

This era was marked by a lack of key ideological or geo-strategic global threats but did not result in any significant departure from cold war-style threat strategies. Containment policy saw continued use under the Clinton administration as part of a dual containment strategy in the Middle East focused on Iran and Iraq.¹² These adjoining countries were each accused of human rights violations, promotion of terrorism, and development of weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. sought to contain or control these activities through sanctions, embargoes, and U.S. regional military presence.¹³

Deterrence also remained a primary strategy to counter what became a much more asymmetric nuclear threat. The breakup of the Soviet Union also broke up ownership and accountability of its nuclear arsenal. Additionally, former "lesser" nuclear powers like China and India suddenly emerged as regional powers requiring attention. Post-Desert Storm Iraq, still led by Saddam Hussein, remained problematic throughout this period and was dealt with in a deterrent manner as the U.S. led international efforts to deny, via military restrictions and economic sanctions, the ability for that country to accumulate or project power. Afghanistan was also of sufficient concern in this era that the Clinton administration launched a preemptive cruise missile attack against terrorist camps there in an effort to stop that country's overt support for terrorists.

Post-9/11: Bush Doctrine

The terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on 11 September 2001 galvanized much of the world in outrage against the tactics of the violent Islamic fundamentalist group Al Qaeda and created a great outpouring of sympathy for the U.S. The mutual resolve of the U.S. and key allies coalesced into a powerful coalition that quickly and decisively defeated the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, primary sponsors of Al Qaeda training and activities. However, global resolve and support began to fade as it became clear that the U.S. "global war on terrorism" would be

continued along policy lines that seemed to be out of character for the U.S. and out of touch with international norms.

The lack of a peer nationalistic power, the presence of a shadowy and stateless enemy, and America's unwavering commitment to globalization pushed the U.S. to redefine its role in the world and develop new foreign policy mechanisms to enable the achievement of U.S. objectives. President Bush outlined the new approach in a speech to the graduating class of the United States Military Academy at West Point on 1 June 2002:

Our Nation's cause has always been larger than our Nation's defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace – a peace that favors liberty. We will defend the peace against the threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.¹⁴

New policies enabling this intent were spelled out in the September 2002 NSS, and brought to life with the March 2003 invasion of Iraq as a display of aggressive military realism tempered with firm liberal resolve. This mix is typically labeled in ongoing debates as neo-conservatism, succinctly described in *The Economist* as “a mixture of hawkishness and idealism: hawkishness on projecting American power abroad, but idealism when it comes to using that power to spread good things like freedom and democracy.”¹⁵ The combination is not unique in American history, but the way that the traditional conceptual ingredients of exceptionalism, preemption, and unilateralism are combined in policy initiatives is a marked departure from the past.

The change becomes apparent if these initiatives are applied to the traditional concept of strategy as the calculated relationship of ends, ways, and means. From this perspective, it can be plausibly argued that, if security at home and abroad is an objective of U.S. foreign policy, promotion of democracy is one of the ways and preemption and unilateralism are simply means to support it. Supporting this is an observation of the current Bush administration that there appears

to be convergence on an irreducible set of normative and causal ideas about liberalism and power in international politics, an essential set of beliefs from which policy choices follow. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration increasingly defined U.S. security requirements in terms of the U.S. capacity to influence the domestic political structures and societies of failed and threatening states.¹⁶

The exceptionalist way, from a U.S. perspective, is one in which citizens of all countries enjoy the basic freedoms embraced by Americans. It is premised on the belief that the spread of democracy is necessary for global safety and security, a belief that “is as close to anything

we have to an empirical law in international relations.”¹⁷ This is consistent with past American exceptionalism, but the significance of the Bush Doctrine is in how strongly vindictionalist it is and how clearly the unilateral and preemptive means are linked to achieving ways.

The decision of the U.S. to move preemptively against Iraq in 2003 without the approval of the United Nations Security Council and without the support of many key U.S. allies prompted strong criticism. The nature of the attack is often characterized as being preventive rather than preemptive, implying that the U.S. deliberately violated international law to further its own interests. By acting unilaterally with the intent of forcefully installing a democratic government, the U.S. left itself open to accusations of having embarked on a campaign of cultural imperialism.

The willingness of the U.S. to act without UN Security Council approval or key ally support can be traced to the U.S. primacy position and neo-conservative strategy. The importance placed by the Bush administration on the Global War on Terror is such that, at least up to the point of the Iraq invasion, there was no tolerance for any actual or perceived hindrance to swift and aggressive responses to the 9/11 attacks. The 2002 NSS goes to great lengths to spell out the need for new strategies to address new threats, but the issue of acting alone is not a new concept nor is it necessarily considered a flawed theory. One convincing argument claims that even if countries identify the need to take strong measures to protect their interests, they can only act to the extent of the means at their disposal. Therefore, in the absence of any global institution capable of policing world affairs, it falls to nations with sufficient power to take action. “Great tasks can be accomplished only by agents of great capability. That is why states, and especially the major ones, are called on to do what is necessary for the world’s survival.”¹⁸

The Hegemonic Conundrum

A closer examination of democratic globalism, preemption, and unilateralism sheds light on the rationale for adopting each strategy but also establishes reasonable counter arguments. The three concepts are hardly distinct and separate policy initiatives – they are woven and intertwined throughout the 2002 NSS as key and essential ingredients to successfully waging the war on terror as well as for promoting U.S. interests around the world. Each policy poses its own dilemma for the U.S. administration in terms of potential cause and effect. The net result is the fundamental conundrum of whether or not the U.S. can keep pace with changes in the international system while sustaining hegemonic stability with itself as the preponderant power.

Exceptionalism via Democratic Globalism

The vindicationist stance remains central to U.S. policy, but it's worth considering whether the interests of the U.S. are best served by a democracy-centric theory or by the promotion of other, more general, values. Concerns about America's seemingly evangelical mission to spread democracy often revolve around questions of how quickly or easily some cultures could adopt it, whether or not the U.S. would appreciate the outcomes of the voting process in anti-American cultures, and whether or not democracy is appropriate without strong existing human rights defense mechanisms.

There is probably much less cause for concern about the acceptance of democracy as there is about the process of achieving a democratic state and the outcomes of free elections in states suspicious of U.S. and/or Western societies. Statistics cited from the 2003 Pew Global Attitudes Project indicate that strong majorities in Kuwait, Jordan, and the Palestine territories believe democracy would work where they live. A 2002 poll by Zogby International indicates that citizens of Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates favor U.S. freedom and democracy in spite of their dim view of U.S. policy in their part of the world.¹⁹

Assuming that democracy could be a viable government form in the Arab world, it is worth examining what the impacts might be on the war against terrorism and the broader globalization aims of the U.S. It is probable that even though al Qaeda is vehemently anti-democratic and unlikely to be politically viable, the forms of government in the Middle East are of no consequence at all to the organization's objective of restoring the Muslim caliphate. Any government tolerant of Western values and presence is a legitimate target for the terrorist organization. In any event, a democratic Middle East offers no panacea, particularly if the U.S. continues to play a major role in the region. Under such circumstances, the advent of democracy would neither end Arab anti-Americanism nor eliminate funding and recruiting sources for al Qaeda.²⁰ Finally, as one analyst notes, it is impossible to guarantee positive voting outcomes from a Western perspective in a democratic Muslim state.

It is highly unlikely that democratically elected Arab governments would be as cooperative with the United States as the current authoritarian regimes. To the extent that public opinion can be measured in these countries, research shows that Arabs strongly support democracy. When they have a chance to vote in real elections, they generally turn out in percentages far greater than Americans do in their elections. But many Arabs hold negative views of the United States. If Arab governments were democratically elected and more representative of public opinion, they would thus be more anti-American.²¹

It is also possible that beating the drum of democratic reform may be the wrong approach in parts of the world where it is so culturally alien. Basic human rights, freedom of speech,

property ownership and economic freedom, and freedom of religion are all part of the U.S. values message that resonate well everywhere. A Dubai business man claims that “it doesn’t matter what you call it, democracy or anything else. What people want above all else is economic development, a way to make a living, transparency, and justice. If this is achieved, they don’t care what you call the system.”²²

At the heart of the issue is the ability of a government to advocate and protect the basic rights of its citizens. The enduring success of the United States is not because the government is freely elected but rather because it is organized as a system of checks-and-balances based on constitutional guarantees of freedom. Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time of his remarks in 2003, told democracy advocates in Al Hillah, Iraq that “To most Americans, the most important thing about democracy is to guarantee human rights and justice for all.”²³

This discussion points directly to the imperative for a system of distributive justice that provides the basis for free societies and the confidence of citizens in their leaders, elected or not. That system is at least as desirable a condition across the globe as democracy and in fact is needed to underpin democratic processes. “Because the aspiration for justice is so deeply rooted in individuals and collectives,” one observer maintains, “any government that seeks to exert authority by peaceful means must attend to it prominently.”²⁴

American exceptionalism is rightfully regarded as policy worthy of continued emphasis. An alternative to vigorously promoting American values is to revert to a more exemplarist position. Given the widespread popularity of the theory of democratic peace and its perceived linkages to stability in economic and international relations, however, it is unlikely that any contemporary administration would be inclined to abandon the vindicationist position.

Preemption

The emergence of the concept of military preemption by the U.S. as a policy tool gained wide-spread attention in the June 2002 West Point speech. Referring to U.S. forces in that speech, President Bush talked of “a military that must be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world. And our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.”²⁵ Three months later, he amplified this point in the 2002 NSS, emphasizing that, “we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists.”²⁶

The focus on preemption in the NSS is a reaction to the new world ushered in by the events of 9/11. The ability of terrorists to endanger U.S. citizens at home was amply demonstrated by those events. Each threat can inflict substantial physical harm to Americans at home and abroad as well as to citizens of foreign states on whom the U.S. relies for the furtherance of other national interests.

The concerns of the current administration are not illusory, and reserving the right to act preemptively makes sense in this threat environment. The problem is not how to manage standing armies whose mobilization can be detected and whose actions can be met and checked along borders, but instead how to manage unconventional attacks, the delivery and timing of which may not be discernable. An additional concern is the ability to slow or stop the proliferation of WMD by eliminating them before development of advanced weapon forms and delivery methods can occur.²⁷

Preemption is considered legitimate and its use recognized in Chapter VII, Article 51 of the United Nations charter. However, certain conditions must be met. The initiator of force must clearly act in self-defense and have compelling evidence of imminent danger to itself. The potential aggressor must have a clear capability and intention to attack, and military force must be used preemptively as a last resort, after all other options have failed.²⁸ The Bush administration understands the potential for friction and sought to deflect criticism by suggesting that traditional concepts of imminent threat were insufficient for today's threats. In making a case for preemption, the 2002 NSS states that "We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries...The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack."²⁹

Making a convincing case to the international community with regards to any adapted concept of imminent threat is necessary to avoid global condemnation. The administration, however, has made no concerted effort to address its conception of the demarcation between justifiable preemption in terms of immediate threat and the unlawful aggression of inevitable threat associated with preventive war. This is arguably the most significant shortcoming of the Bush Doctrine.³⁰

The threat posed by terrorists and rogue nations might ultimately require preemption, but the cold war strategies of containment and deterrence remain useful for reducing or eliminating opportunities to cause harm. Deliberately or not, each is in fairly widespread use today by the U.S. Efforts toward economic and democratic reform, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance in less-developed countries, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, are believed

to be helpful in reducing conditions ripe for recruiting future terrorists, thus containing the spread. U.S. alliances and diplomatic efforts in the Pacific and in former Soviet Union satellite states suggest American intent to contain China.³¹

Deterrence traditionally used a “big stick” approach to gaining compliance, meaning some tangible punishment. However, it is proving reasonably effective against international terrorism in a far more covert fashion—denial of capability. The ability of the U.S. to monitor nearly all modes of communication seriously disrupts terrorist command and control, cooperative international finance efforts dramatically affect terrorist funding, and international security cooperation hampers terrorist freedom of movement.

Unilateral Action

The success of a substantial U.S.-led coalition against Iraq in 1991, exemplary of President H.W. Bush’s “New World Order,” was followed by a series of U.S. engagements of uneven success that moved the country away from global entanglements. This process accelerated in the mid-1990s when the Republican party took control of both houses of Congress and began restricting funding to reduce money allocated to international organizations. The Senate’s refusal to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1999 was soon followed by President G.W. Bush’s renunciation of the Kyoto Protocol, refusal to participate in the International Criminal Court, and abrogation of the anti-ballistic missile treaty, all alarming developments when contrasted with typical U.S. foreign policy in the latter half of the 20th century.³²

There appears to be diminishing belief on the part of the U.S. government that the requisite international will to act is either necessary or sufficient to protect and promote U.S. interests. Historically, Americans do not trust international rules and institutions to be either honest or helpful. From this perspective, U.S. policy makers after 9/11 have increasingly believed it more advantageous to dictate international norms rather than retreat to isolationism. “[I]f the stakes are rising and the margins of error are shrinking in the war on terrorism, multilateral norms and agreements that sanction and limit the use of force are just annoying distractions.”³³

Countering arguments for fewer foreign entanglements are concerns that the U.S. is burning needed diplomatic bridges and undermining the potential for hegemonic stability, creating instead conditions for power balancing and the eventual emergence of peer great powers. While there are currently no individual or collective states capable of militarily challenging the U.S. (hard balancing), there is considerable speculation that other elements of

power can be leveraged against the U.S. in what is termed soft balancing. The U.S. has avoided any meaningful balancing actions since the end of the Cold War largely because of its longstanding reputation as a benign power oriented on protecting the sovereignty of other nations and the rights of citizens everywhere. That paradigm might be shifting. “The Bush strategy of aggressive unilateralism” one analyst points out, “is changing the United States’ long-enjoyed reputation of benign intent and giving other major powers reasons to fear its power.”³⁴

The result is the concept of soft balancing, challenging U.S. power through the use of international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements.³⁵ Indeed, “coalitions of the unwilling” worked together before and after the Iraq invasion in order to restrain U.S. efforts and extract a price for failure to work within accepted international norms and procedures. France, Germany, and Russia combined their efforts to stifle U.S. efforts to gain U.N. Security Council backing for the invasion. France and Germany also worked to prevent NATO involvement as well. France, in particular, viewed the recent actions of the U.S. with alarm and worked deliberately to deflect American power. “The [U.N.] Security Council and the European Union,” French President Chirac claims in this regard, “are becoming counterweights to the United States in the post-Cold War, post-September 11 world—and in each of those bodies, France has a say greater than its size or military capability.”³⁶

The cumulative effects of the diplomatic balancing efforts imposed a very real cost to the U.S. Turkey’s refusal to allow U.S. troops to stage and attack from Turkish soils wasted time, money, and possibly some American lives when the Iraq invasion began without the full weight of intended military power. Lack of military support from traditional allies has proven even more detrimental in the post-conflict phase. American difficulties in establishing post-war stability may be the most influential lesson learned by U.S. policy makers. “After the military intervention is over,” international relations expert John Ikenberry notes, “the target country has to be put back together.”

Peacekeeping and state building are inevitably required, as are long-term strategies that bring the U.N., the World Bank, and the major powers together to orchestrate aid and other forms of assistance... Peacekeeping troops may be required for many years...Regional conflicts inflamed by outside intervention must also be calmed...When these costs and obligations are added to America’s imperial military role, it becomes even more doubtful that the neoimperial strategy can be sustained at home for the long haul—the classic problem of imperial overstretch.³⁷

The nature of the contemporary threat is such that the U.S. will not always have the luxury of working in concert with allies to deal with rising threats, but it at least owes the world a clear

sense of its concept of imminent threat, should a situation like Iraq arise again. This is extremely important if the U.S. is to retain any vestige of the liberal institutional bargain that worked so well after 1945. The Bush administration initially acknowledged that bargain in its efforts to engage the U.N. in the fall and winter of 2002/2003. The U.S. sought and achieved U.N. resolutions condemning the actions of Iraq and establishing conditions to avoid sanctions. Continued U.N. cooperation netted Security Council warnings of military consequences as well as a resolution to use military force if Iraq failed to comply with established conditions.

Ultimately, the U.N. refused to accept the imminent threat argument of the U.S. and thus follow through with military action. For some members of the Security Council, the imminent threat appeared more to be that of the inevitable threat rationale for preventive war. The U.S. forged ahead on its own, but subsequent events demonstrated the value of the institutional bargain in terms of allied support for efforts at hegemonic stability. In the fall of 2003, the Bush administration asked the U.N. for help with the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq, demonstrating “a growing appreciation for the costs of acting autonomously, if not a preference for placing Iraq policy in a multilateral framework.”³⁸

Conclusion

The policies articulated by the current Bush administration in the October, 2002 NSS are entirely relevant to the contemporary operating environment and should not be dismissed as some sort of alarmist over-reaction. They should, however, be closely examined in the context of the long-term good of the world rather than the short-term crisis of a single nation. The U.S. is positioned to provide hegemonic stability for decades to come, but not without holding up its end of the liberal institutional bargain.

Expanding international acceptance of U.S. hegemonic benefits relies on a sufficiently broad tolerance of the values inherent in the liberal contract. The ongoing efforts to bring increasingly culturally-diverse nations under this umbrella cannot succeed unless the will of the people in those countries is engaged to seek honest reform. World-wide democracy is a laudable goal for the U.S. to champion, but it may be too much, too soon for countries lacking the structure and discipline to protect and enforce the individual rights envisioned by the U.S. exceptionalist position.

It is entirely reasonable to believe the U.S. might find it necessary to move preemptively against a dangerous and shadowy threat, but it is a viable option long available to any nation and hardly worthy of a desk-thumping policy centerpiece. Similarly, unilateral action on the part of the U.S. may be necessary if faced with a sufficient threat and lacking timely support of the

international community. However, the current situation in Iraq lends more than adequate evidence that there can be a heavy price to pay for solitary action.

Failure to take the larger and longer view in international relations places the U.S. at risk of totally succumbing to a trait attributed to the country on more than one occasion: it can win the fight but not the war. The world is moving on and the U.S. cannot prevail with policies perceived as brutish and/or illegitimate. Entrenched in the American exceptionalist conviction is a deep sense of individualism that resists outside influences, but:

despite these forces and influences, the United States continues to need an international order organized around rules and institutional cooperation. America cannot achieve its goals without multilateral agreements and institutionalized partnerships. This is why the great drama of the past century persists in the twenty-first, as the United States both resists and rediscovers the international rule of law.³⁹

Endnotes

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